A Talk by Edgar Orr, Conducted at the
Los Angeles Valley College Historical Museum Association
Recorded by James L. Dodson
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You are about to hear a talk by Mr. Edgar Orr on stagecoaching in Southern California. This is a meeting of the Los Angeles Valley College Historical Museum Association held on November 1, 1982. Unfortunately, the last part of Mr. Orr's remarks were not recorded on this tape, hence the tape ends rather abruptly. The next voice you hear will be that of Mr. Orr. This is James L. Dodson, Curator of the museum speaking.

You have to remember that California previously to the Gold Rush had no roads. There were trails, and in certain places, there were very, very primitive roads where the - could manipulate their - Transportation primarily was on horseback and if you wanted to haul anything, you did it on pack horses and pack mules. So when the Gold Rush started, they had no means of heavy transport at all. Either they were people or for goods. So in the first few years after the Gold Rush - well, I might say the first year, there was nothing.

But the first stagecoach line to be inaugurated in California was from San Francisco to San Jose. This went along the shore of the bay. There were no real roads, just a trail, and this was fine in the spring, summer and fall. But in the late winter when the rains started, this became something else. In the first year, the road down in the southern end of the bay area became at least a mile wide because every time they went through, they had to move over a little bit because of the former place was a rut too deep to travel. Now it took some nine hours to travel from San Francisco to San Jose.

The man who stated it used an old French- well, really it was not a coach. It was more or less of a something that had been used for transportation in an earlier time and it was a broken down old vehicle. But he managed to charge $32.00 or two pinches of gold dust to get there. The next year - and this was in '49, and in '50 - the winter of '50, he decided that he was not going to do this in the since of traveling all the way to San Francisco, so he made arrangements with a steam boat. He would go take passengers from San Jose to Alaveso which was at the end of the bay. They would take a steam boat up to San Francisco or other ports that they might want to go to. Then passengers going in the opposite directions, he would pick them up at Alveso and take them down to

San Jose. Now this was a very first group in California. It caught on very quickly and in time, Sacramento became the hub of Northern California stage lines. Many of them were in competition with one another. In fact, there were about 25 or 30 at one time until some of the bigger operators decided that they would consolidate and do away with a lot of the smaller lines. They immediately did this by dropping the fares. This happened in 1855. There were several companies that went together. They immediately made their plans in 1855 and in 1856, they consolidated. They did so and were capitalized in a million dollars. They bought out certain lines and the ones that would not sell, they dropped their rates for the public to such a point that the others couldn't operate and so they just went out of business. But they would buy up the stock; the harness, the coaches, and whatever. So much for the Northern California area.

The original stage line from San Francisco to San Jose was sold to a couple by the name of Crandall. Well, Crandall was the main man and he was really the operator. Crandall and his partner had been in the stage coach business in Mexico, so they were quite familiar with the type of stagecoaching that would go on in California. So they immediately upgraded their operation. They bought better coaches. Some of them were built here in California, but all of them would manage to buy one, or two, or

three, or four Concords. Now this was quite an outlive capital at the time because they would cost them $1,250 to $1,500. So you didn't have many of these. They weighed one ton and had to be pulled by at least four, but most generally, by six horses. Crandall then then extended his line to Monterey and they put in a daily service from San Jose to San Francisco and a bi-weekly service from Monterey to San Francisco, in both directions. This continued on for quite a few years and that was about as far as any stage line came down the coast.

Now stages started in the Los Angeles area in 1855 by Banning and Alexander. They ran a very short stage line to begin with from San Pedro to Los Angeles. Then they gradually expanded and ran a line from Los Angeles to San Bernardino, then a line from Los Angeles to San Diego and later they extended their line on to Yuma going via Riverside, Temecula, Warner's Ranch and then down on the east side of the Laguna Mountains, across the boarder into Mexico to escape the sand dunes and then on up into Yuma. Quite a trip. Also, at the same time, Banning and Alexander instituted a freight service over the same thing. Now this caused a great deal of trouble as far roads. Alexander and Banning made their own roads. There was no money available to them to have any roads made. While stage coaching on these roads after some of these twenty ton wagons have gone over them, certain ruined the roads so any time you took

a trip on the stage from Los Angeles - let's say to San Diego, you have a very nice rough ride. Not only that, but in the summer time you had a very nice dusty ride.

They said that certain stage operators had a class system. First class, second class, and third class. First class rode inside the coach. Second class, if there was room, rode inside the coach, or they rode meavy by the driver - there could be at least two by the driver, or they rode on top. The third class always rode outside and on top. Sometimes if the boot wasn't full why they would ride in the boot. But the reason was for this class was for the fact that when you came to a high hill or a sandy gravelly wash, the first class stayed in the coach, second class got out in walked, and third class pushed.

Some of the other interesting things about coaching in those early days was the fact that there very many accidents. Accidents were caused by chuckholes, floods, drivers driving too fast, runaways, broken harness, broken wheels, think of anything like that and that was what could happen. Now, the orders were to ride the coach was to stay with it. If it went over the side of the hill, just stay in the coach, you would probably came out of it alright. If you tried to jump, you probably got killed. If you got in the flood, you might be swept away by the stream, but if you

stayed in the coach, it would float to a certain extent and you might get out, the horses may drown and one thing or another, but you would be pretty safe. Of course with a broken wheel, you would probably get bruised and one thing or another, but the man who really got hurt on that was the driver, or anybody on that high seat in the front of the coach. Usually if something like a chuck-hole of that nature, why they were pushed off and many times they were either kicked by the horses or run over by the wagon or hit their head on the poll or the tongue as we know it and so this was just a rather dangerous pursuit.

However, the drivers were called not drivers, but they were called many names, but the one I like to use is "whip." There are other names like- they never used coachman. That was out in California. No one ever used the word coachman. If they did, it was an insult to these "whips" or "jeegles" as they were sometimes called. And there were many interesting characters in this particular field. But that we'll do a little later.

In the staging in the Los Angeles area, it was to begin with not very lucrative. The passengers sort of didn't really pay the cost of it. There were no mail contracts, so the Banning people would often just take the mail from the ships and bring it up to Los Angeles, and they did this purely as a service to the people in

Los Angeles. Now there were only a - in this particular time - there were only about 1,500 people in Los Angeles. So, in all the ways from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, you would probably have less than 5,000 people. So, you see, stagecoaching wasn't too lucrative at that particular time. Then they did expand to San Bernardino and later to San Diego and even for a while to Salt Lake City by way of Las Vegas. Mainly the thing that made this later was the express. The stagecoaches became "express" wagons as much as anything else. So we're faced with the fact that, uh, no stage line could really operate at a profit without either having a U.S. mail contract or an express business.

One of the great problems in our stage coaching in Southern California was to go north like to Fort Cajon and to the mines in Kern County, was San Fernando Pass. San Fernando Pass was really a bugaboo and yet it was used and I would like to, if I can find it here, I'd like to read you a description of Banning when he decided he was going to put a stagecoach over San Fernando Pass. This was in 1854. May I quote this:

There was stage business to be had in the Fort Cajon area as well as in the mines of the Kern River days but the roads such as they were practically non-existent. Particularly the San Fernando

Range and the San Fransiscito Canyon. Trails did exist for pack trains and the railroad as such was unknown in the early 1850's.

In order to gain publicity for a way to raise money to improve a way to the north, Phinnius Banning made the attempt in December of 1854 to drive a stage over the San Fernando range. And this is a quote: Banning sat on a box of his coach to which were harnessed a half a dozen well-fed panting and foaming mustangs. He had succeeded in reaching the summit of the San Fernando and the question among his nine wondering passengers to had toiled up the mountain on foot was how that stage could ever descend, all declaring it an act of madness to attempt it. Banning laughingly assured them that it was alright and that a man who couldn't drive a stage down that hill was no driver at all and should confine himself to ox taming in the valley. Now he cracked his whip, tightened his lines, whistled to his trembling mustangs, and urged them to the brink of oppressiveness and in a moment, they are going down, and down, down, bang, clatter, rackety, bang. Sometimes the horses was ahead of the stage and sometimes the stage was ahead of the horses. All, however, going down, down, down, with a crash. Finally the conglomeration of chains, harness, coach, mustangs, and Banning were found by the pursuing passengers in an inextricable mass of confusion - contusions, scratches, bruises, batter, cracks, and brakes forming a general smash and pile-up

in a thicket in the chaparral at the foot of the mountain. "Didn't I tell you so?" said Banning, "A beautiful descent. "Far less difficult than I had anticipated. I intend that staging to Fort Cajon and Kern River should be a success. Gentlemen, you see my judgment is good." End quote. Well, he was quite a character, of course, and I'm sure you have many tales about Banning, but that gives you an idea of what that pass was like.

Now in the early days when they had to go over it, they usually had a windless thing and they windless down or they windless up as the case may be or otherwise they would be just like as it was described here - a crash at the bottom. And this went on for years and years.

Finally, in 1858, the Los Angeles Supervisors did appropriate some money; $3,000 first, another $2,000 and, finally, it ended up that they had $8,000 to improve this road. The reason they did was because they wanted the Butterfield stage to come though Los Angeles. So they had to improve this - this pass, and they had to improve the San Fransiscito Road, which they did do, in time to get the stage through. We're going to go into that a little later. However, we'll go up the coast a ways now.

We had stagecoaching for many years up as far as Santa Barbara, and we had stagecoaching down the coast as far as Monterey. But between, there was nothing in the way of stagecoaching. You had to take horses, or ride horses, or you didn't go. It was that bad. Also, it was a great place for highwaymen. And this continued on until oh very late - as late as 1900. Highwaymen were quite famous along our coast route in the various places. Three places were very bad. Part of the route that they developed went along with what they called the Rincon. Do you know what the Rincon is? It's that area just north of Ventura right along the ocean where it's very narrow there. Now stages in that area, particularly when they got to Rincon point had to take to the ocean. Most of the time they travelled on the beach, but at that particular point, the ocean came right up to the land so they had to wait and always be sure that they went by there at low tide because they would be out in two or three feet of ocean water. But that wasn't the only problem they had in that particular area. In the early days, there was a mud volcano just to the south of Rincon Point which was active many times. It threw out mud, steam, rocks, and what not. Now just where that was I couldn't tell you, because I don't know. I often looked as I went by to see if I could see any evidence of it, but I don't see any. However, should it ever happen to erupt when the stage was

going by, it would probably cause the teams to bolt and run away. So, what did they do? Will, they just ran them into the ocean. That would stop them. But a couple of times they had a little trouble and the stages did get out in the ocean and they weren't meant to. Fortunately there happened to be some cowboys over there and they lassoed the teams and brought them back to shore. However, they did loose some mail and some other things on that stage.

There were some very famous "whips" on our thing. Crandall was one who happened to be killed in an accident when he was jerked off the seat and hit his head. Well, actually he was kicked in the head, but he recovered immediately after that, saw to his passengers and saw that everything was alright. He happened to be quite near his home and he didn't feel very well, so he decided he would let the helper - he happened to have a helper with him - and let the helper take the stage on in and he went home and he said, "Well, I think I'll lie down. I just feel a little funny" and he never got up. He died within three hours. So you see it could be very dired of these accident.

One of the stage drivers was approaching a bridge. Now a bridge was almost an uncommon thing along the coast. Most of the places had to be boarded. Most of the streams had to be boarded if

they had water, but this time there was a flood on it so the water was up to the top of the bridge. This particular whip was, I think, a kind of a wild man so he saw there was nothing to it and he drove right on across and he got out in the middle and the whole bridge went out with the coach too. So, fortunately they only lost two horses by drowning, but the coach floated down the river and everybody was rescued. But they lost all their goods that they had plus anything whatever else was on the coach. They found two of the four-horse team two miles down the river. Two were left.

Finally they did continue the stage line from Santa Barbara north. It went by first Gaviota Pass and then they finally went over San Marcos Pass which was a much shorter route, but much more dangerous. Then they would go down the Santa Ynez Valley and they used to stop at the place called Ballards which is near Matty's Tavern and then on to North Alamos and that route.

There was a very interesting stage holdup in the Santa Ynez Valley as to approach the San Marcos Pass from the north. One of the holdup men decided that he was going to perform a holdup, so first was a wagon with a father and son on it carrying some grain. He stopped them and took what little they had and he knew that a stage was due about this time so he waited. As the stage approached, he stepped out and had them stop. He went through all

the passengers, took everything they had and then he asked the driver when the stage for the other direction was due at this point. The driver said in about an hour so he said okay, we'll just wait. So he had them all sort of lined up there and they waited for another hour or so until that other stage from the other direction came. He did the same thing to that stage. He took all their money and, of course, a lot of them in those days carried guns; took their guns and all that and he said I'll leave your guns down the road and he rode off his happy way. So, you see, there were some very funny things that happened in the way of stage routing.

However, most of the robberies along the coast route were done by the Californianos. We'll have to call them that because they were now part of the United States and we were no longer Mexicans and these were the disgruntled ones who did not accept the United States, so there they were over a period of a good many years. These people who operated, and you probably know of some. Eurieta was one. Some of his gang - Eurieta didn't always act with them - but they did act. There were several Juaquines in his group, so you never knew which Juaquine was performing the thing. Also, Vasquez was one of the later ones. He managed to holdup a few stages and some of his people also did it on their own. One of the worst ones in the sense of his own self was Jack Powers. Jack

Powers had been a school teacher and decided he could do better as a stage robber. Everything that Jack Powers did would turn wrong for him. He tried to hold up a stage once and he was going along on the horse and the horse ran away with him. Another time while he was trying to hold a stage and the team ran away. So he was never very successful, but he never gave up. He finally did manage to robbery and they caught him immediately afterwards and put him away.

Another thing that happened in the many sense of robbery was the fact that horses, of course, were a very nice thing. Many of the robbers just would go in and clean out a stage station of their horses. Well, of course, here came a stage and they expected to get another team and there were no teams available. This happened innumerable times and, in fact, it happened just outside of Ventura on a stage line that used to go through the Santa Clara Valley and this was a very short stage line from Ventura to Lyon's station which is just south where Newhall now is. So the stage line had just really started so the guy was almost out of business before it even got going, however, he managed to survive for a few years. But the loss of several teams, now a team for stage was four or six horses and when you have lost a team of horses for a stage, you had a great loss.

The stage line finally, as it went through, from directly from San Jose south to Santa Barbara had a lot of trouble up there when particularly when they got in the Salinas and King City area. There was a very many outlaws in that area so they had trouble there. But it was always - Anyway, they did get the stage road through and they did have their troubles, but they managed to overcome a lot of this by getting the treasure box and keeping it bolted to the stage which these guys sometimes learned how to work that. They would just tear it out of the stage and ruin the stage, but often ...

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